
A Poetics of Change

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Abstract

The progress of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy depends upon our capacity to study, in a scientific manner, the process of therapy. Since a study of this kind involves charting the waxing and waning of something as elusive as the sense of personal existence, the task has, in the past, been seen as virtually impossible. However, words, or more particularly the way words are used, manifest such shifting states. Sophisticated linguistic analyses are available which give us the means to conduct these necessary studies.

In this article, I am suggesting that an ongoing sense of personal existence, which William James called self, is 'multilayered', in the manner of the poetic, and that indices of such 'layering' will reflect beneficial change. The description of this zone of experience, which might be called the synchronic, depends upon contributions from Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Henri Bergson, and Ferdinand de Saussure.

The most fundamental element of personal existence is the feeling that something is happening within us. The movements of inner life give us our sense of being alive. These movements and this feeling of aliveness are characteristically diminished in those who seek help from a therapist. The aim of therapy is to help the individual gain the experience of a larger form of consciousness in which there is a core of vitality and well-being.

If the practice of psychotherapy is to progress as a science we must be able to test our theories of how this change might come about, and also to evaluate the efficacy of a particular therapeutic approach. Observations are required, and measurements made. Yet we are afraid of these processes. We deal with a world of feelings, of shades of feelings, of nuances and shift, a world in which reality is not an absolute and into which is penetrated illusion, fantasy, imagination. The techniques of psychological assessment, the rating scales, the grids, the so-called 'instruments' of psychological measurement, seem likely to misrepresent, distort or brutalize this world of human experience, or even, in these forms of investigation, to miss it out entirely. How then can we chart the waxing and waning of something as elusive and evanescent as the sense of personal being?

In this article, I suggest that the indices of beneficial change will be found in the structure of the therapeutic conversation. The intriguing new discipline of linguistic analysis promises to advance our understanding of the therapeutic process and to make it amenable to scientific study. Words, or more particularly the way words are used, give us the means of tracking the shifting states of what we call 'self'.

The multi-layered moment

In beginning the task of evaluation, we must start by identifying what it is we are trying to track. William James, who spent his life trying to grasp in words the nature and essence of personal existence, what he called 'self', provides a suitable beginning to an attempt to define markers of change.

In James' great work of 1890 he outlined his conception of self as 'duplex', involving a reflective awareness of inner events which he called the 'stream of consciousness'. He also put forward original ideas about memory and the human experience of time. The whole opus was devalued and relatively disregarded for much of the twentieth century, during the period of the positivist-behaviourist hegemony. However, something of a recovery began in the early 1970s. Developmental psychologists began to use Jamesian concepts to organize their research approaches. In psychoanalysis, Winnicott (1971) implicitly placed at the centre of our therapeutic concerns the experience of 'going on being', an expression very like the 'stream of consciousness'. However, neither he nor Kohut, who at about the same time was attempting to develop a meta-psychology of self (1971; 1977:310-11), provided a definition for the term.

Yet such a definition is the necessary starting point in developing a theory of self which has a scientific basis (Meares:1977; Meares and Hobson:1977). The Jamesian definition is the centre-piece of the Conversational Model, a project which was launched by Robert Hobson(1971) and later named by him(1985).

The task of evaluating change by means of the Jamesian definition seems daunting, even impossible. How can we grasp the movements of a 'stream', which is neither tangible nor visible? An answer comes in terms of conversation.

The conversation both manifests and constitutes a personal reality. The focus of this article is upon manifestation. Indirectly, through the study of language, we can discern shifts in the flux of personal being which are evident not only in the content but also in the form of conversation.

The idea that language allows a metaphoric viewing of the experience of self depends upon the notion that the experience has dynamic 'shape'. In a figurative sense, it can be depicted. My depiction depends upon the idea that self is multi-layered, a state in which, superimposed, a number of episodes, experiences, motivations and so forth, are bound together by a particular feeling. These episodes are experienced in the present but, at the same time, there is an awareness of their pastness.

The experience of selfhood which I am describing has also been described, in different ways, by Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf.

Proust wrote: 'Our self is made from the superposition of our successive states' (cited in Poulet:1977:91-2). He is saying that states which had once been experienced at different times, in succession, are now experienced at a single time, simultaneously. This conception implies two axes of reality. The first of these is horizontal, the reality of succession, in which one event follows another. The other reality, that of self, arises as if vertically from a single moment and in this moment, other moments, other events, are simultaneously experienced.

We can visualise this experience by imagining that the various superposed states are recorded on planes of glass so that, peering down through these multiple layers, the totality of self appears. At heightened moments of selfhood, a sense of what George Poulet calls 'transparency' arises. At these moments, as Poulet put it in his essay on Proust, 'the ordinary opacity of being, of places, of moments, would have given place to a certain transparency so that in plunging his gaze into the depths of his own being, one could see the various epochs of it rise tier upon tier like the cells in a beehive' (ibid: 94).

The metaphor of the beehive, however, does not quite capture the experience, a main feature of which is that *something else* arises out of the awareness of simultaneity. This moment does not merely consist of a conglomerate of this and other moments, added together. The experience of simultaneity is of unification, and of a new ordering which is more than the sum of various elements of the past which contribute to it. This is the zone of the poetic, to which I shall come shortly.

The experience of transparency was described in a more personal way by Virginia Woolf. She wrote:

The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the

depths. In those moments I find one of my greatest satisfactions, not that I am thinking of the past; but that it is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when it is backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else, when the film on the camera reaches only the eye (1892:114).

The art of Virginia Woolf seemed to be directed towards trying to grasp and express what she called these 'moments of being'. The goal was more explicit in the case of Proust whose search was for lost time. But this was a special kind of time, the sense of temporality which arises with 'the simultaneity of the successive, the presence, in the present, of *another* present: the past' (cited in Poulet:1977:94). His quest, we might suppose, was for the experience of selfhood.

The Proustian time, the temporal experience which comes with the experience of self, that awareness of the movements and the flow of inner life which William James described, was also figuratively depicted by James himself as lying in a perpendicular or vertical relationship to the horizontal of actual time. Personal time, the temporality of self, is, James pointed out, illusory. He wrote: 'The specious present, the intuited duration, stands permanent, like the rainbow on the waterfall, with its own quality unchanged by the events that stream through it' (1892:286).

We come now to a strange paradox. Since the temporality of self is that of the zone of the simultaneous and this is illusory, a 'rainbow on the waterfall', we conclude that to become alive and 'real' we must live in the midst of illusion.

Durée

At the time of James' writing, a young French philosopher had married a cousin of Marcel Proust. He was Henri Bergson. He was about to become the great philosopher of his time. In 1889 he had written a book which appeared in English in 1910 entitled *Time and Free Will*. He argued that the inner life of humankind involves an experience of time which differs from scientific time, the time of the clock. The time of personal being he called '*durée*'.

Bergson's conception was more utilitarian than that of Proust, which depended upon involuntary memory. Bergson's '*durée*' seems to correspond with Pierre Janet's '*présentification*', the creation of the present moment (Ellenberger:1970). This creation, so Janet believed, is the most complex operation achieved by the brain-mind system and so is the most fragile, the most easily lost of mental

functions. The notion of '*présentification*', lost for many years, has now returned to psychology and is studied, in a limited and restricted form, as working memory.

The zone of personal being was pictured by Bergson, in a schematic way, as an inverted cone. The pointed end is the present which is continually moving in a horizontal plane. Arising from the present moment are various planes or layers of memory, each higher plane more extensive than the plane below (1911:211).

The conception of the multi-layered moment brings to mind the work of the German mathematician Bernhard Riemann (1826-1866), who introduced the mathematical idea of the multi-layered surface, an idea in which Bergson was interested (De Leuze:1991:39).

These conceptions lead to large and difficult questions. Most importantly, how can we be known to others? How can we express ourselves when self is the multi-layered moment, which is theoretically still but experienced as moving, and which is instantaneously present but includes the past? Our language is capable of telling only one thing at a time in the mode of the 'chronicle' (Meares:1998), a catalogue of the events and activities of one's daily life. This is the experience in which our patients are caught, with no self in it (Meares: 1993, 1997). It is the experience of succession, and of life, as the philosopher A. J. Ayer was fond of saying, as 'one damn thing after another'. In order to join with others by sharing inner states we must use a different language. Since we cannot describe the multi-layered experience of self in a way which resembles ordinary linear prose, particularly of the 'chronicle' type, we need a language of simultaneity. This is the language of poetry.

The poetic

The structure of the poetic can be illustrated by an example, a short poem of Octavio Paz (1979:91):

If man is dust,
he is the one
who travels the plains.

An image of the scene where the words 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' are being intoned is linked to another scene, of the dry inland, where, in the far distance, men are moving, perhaps in a camel train, dust rising from it. The superposition of the two images has a meaning which is greater than each image alone. The

linking is created through a framework of subtle rhythms, a patterning of words which convey a feeling which is the essence of the poem.

A rather similar structure is found in the following haiku (Bownas and Thwaite:1964:116):

Girls planting paddy:
only their songs
free of the mud.

The mud, like the dust, conveys the notion of human materiality and its limitations. The song shows the opposite, the possibility of going beyond the bodily cage, towards a kind of freedom.

The main effect of these poems comes with the superposition of opposites out of which arises a third thing, a representation beyond the original images. This notion of the third thing, leads to the complex notion of the symbol.

In the haiku we can say, in a coarse sense, that the mud 'symbolizes' the body and the songs the soul, using a distinction which can be found in all cultures. But this is not where the symbolization ends. The main aim of the haiku is the representation of a mood, something which cannot be seen or touched but which is evoked by suitable presentation of the sensate world. The mood of this poem, like any mood, is rather hard exactly to pin down. There is a muted sadness, a sense of longing to break free from the toils and the boundedness of ordinary living, and, at the same time, a kind of leap of exhilaration, a feeling that, in a way, with the songs, it has been done.

Poetic language is not used, in pure form, in ordinary life. The nearest approximation to it is found in early childhood before the experience of inner life is discovered at four, five or six years of age. The child engaged in symbolic play uses a language which is qualitatively different from the linear language which is logical and purposeful and clearly communicative. The child's language in symbolic play accompanies an emergent symbolic function. It is associative and compressed. Thoughts sometimes flow into each other in the manner of simultaneity or condensation. This language has the function, I have suggested, of representing and so bringing into being self as the 'stream of consciousness'. It is internalized, Vygotsky believed, to become 'inner speech', the language of inner life.

With the discovery of an inner life and of the experience of the stream of consciousness, the curious language associated with symbolic play is no longer

used in isolation. Rather, it is now co-ordinated with the other form of language, which is linear, logical and related to outer events. Ordinary conversation is now made up of two fundamental languages. Embedded in the form of social speech are the elements of another language which has the function of representing inner events, or self (Meares:1993, 1998, 2000; Meares and Sullivan:2003).

The synchronic and the use of metaphor

The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, has become known as the discoverer of two axes in the structure of language. In an essay published in 1916, he made the distinction in terms of time, remarking that 'very few linguists suspect that the intervention of the factor of time creates difficulties peculiar to linguistics and opens to their science two completely divergent paths' (1916:54). The form of language which concerned time—as-duration, 'the axis of simultaneity' as he called it, came to be called synchronic. Like Bergson and James, he set this axis at right angles to the 'axis of succession', the diachronic mode.

Using the language of Saussure, social speech is disposed along the horizontal 'axis of succession', in the diachronic mode. In pure form, it has the structure of 'chronicle'. The axis of the simultaneous, the synchronic and vertical mode, is that of inner speech.

Markers of self are to be found in the mode of the synchronic. Beneficial effect is indicated when the language shifts towards this kind of language. I am talking about a poetics of change.

In talking this way, I do not mean that the patient begins to write poetry as he or she begins to get better, although this idea is not entirely fanciful since borderline patients often begin to write as they improve and sometimes the writing consists of poetry (Stevenson:1992). Rather, what I want to suggest is that the principles of an individual's organization of experience resemble the principles of poetry.

The first principle is that of the simultaneous, in which phenomena usually considered discrete and, in a figurative sense, occupying different spaces, are brought together in the same space. The simplest example is the metaphor, which is a main feature of the poetic. Concerning the language of poetry and the poet, Aristotle (McKeon (ed.) : 2001:1479) wrote: 'The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor'.

But for metaphor to become a marker of change it is used in a particular way. It is not mere adornment. It is a means towards establishing the interplay between inner and outer out of which the third thing, self, arises. A symbolic and metaphoric form of speech is needed to portray those aspects of our inner experience which cannot be seen. Most fundamental of these various unified experiences is emotion. As T.S. Eliot remarked: 'What every poet starts from is his own emotions' (Gordon:1998:233). And at the bottom of every self state is a feeling, whether or not it is a salient part of that awareness.

The mechanism of metaphor goes in two directions. First, we take things from the world which have a felt similarity to an inner experience in order to depict this experience. As Aristotle (McKeon (ed.) : 2001:1479) put it: 'A good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars'.

This depiction has an effect on the realisation of that experience which may not be yet fully known. In a way, the poem tells the poet what his experience is.

The second movement in the mechanism of metaphor is to return to the world that which had been appropriated from it, in this way making known to others something of ourselves.

Metaphor can also be used in another way in which the transfer stays in the world. This might be an indication of cleverness but it is not a marker of self. What I mean is illustrated by considering two translations of the Old English poem, *Beowulf*, the earliest European vernacular epic.

In this passage, the young Swedish prince, Beowulf, sets sail for Denmark with a small band of warriors in a bid to kill a monster which is nightly ravaging the Danish King's mead hall, and devouring his people. Beowulf's warriors are boarding the ship. Here is Tolkien's translation (1950:xxix):

In her bows/mounted
brave men/blithely, Breakers/turning
spurned the/shingle. Splendid/armour
they bore/aboard. . . .

And here is the translation of Seamus Heaney (1999:lines 212-214).

Men climbed eagerly up the gang plank,
Sand churned in surf, warriors loaded
A cargo of weapons. . . .

Tolkien's passage seems strange, bare, even awkward, yet it is, in my view, the better poem. Consider the metaphor for the waves in each case. Heaney uses a 'churn' i.e. 'a machine for making butter' (OED). The metaphoric transfer here is in the world. On the other hand, 'Breakers turning - spurned the shingle' introduces inner states. Spurning implies pride, not only in the height, the hauteur, of waves, poised above the shingle, but also the pride of the men, setting out, against the odds. Every word is layered. 'Breakers' can refer not only to the 'surf' but also to 'conflict'; 'turning' overtly describes the revolution of waves, but covertly it suggests the gaze of the men, turning their eyes from the shore towards the desolate vastness they are about to cross.

The diachronic and the vehicle of the body

Tolkien's language builds on affective tone. 'In her bows/mounted/brave men/blithely' conveys the sense of something grand and reckless while the sound of the words has in it the elements of a dark music, a hard beating, like a drum-beat, or the beat of waves. There is, in this form of expression, an intensity lacking in the Heaney lines: 'Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank', as if they were a mob of tourists.

An affective tone, including the sense of aliveness, which is at the core of 'going on being', is conveyed by intonation and also by rhythm. The rhythmic element of poetry leads us to consider again the notion that the experience of self is illusory, that the present moment in which we live does not conform to the facts of the world. However, the illusory state of self cannot exist without that world. Self, like play, is both real and unreal. We can think about the matter in terms of the synchronic and the diachronic.

There can be no self without the axis of succession. A life goes on from moment to moment, just as a heart maintains existence from beat to beat. There can be no 'going on being' without this basis. The actuality of the body is the vehicle for the illusory experience of self.

In the same way, social speech is the vehicle for that form of language which manifests and represents the experience of self. Also, in the same way, poetry needs the axis of succession as its vehicle. In a well-known lecture A.E. Housman said:

Poems very rarely consist of poetry and nothing else; and pleasure can be derived also from their other ingredients. I am convinced that most readers, when they think they are admiring poetry are really admiring, not the poetry in the passage before them, but something else in it, which they like better than poetry (cited in Hamburger:1972:23-24).

He might be saying that the language of the diachronic can be attractively disposed through its rhythms and balances, so that it is enjoyed, but it is not poetry if the axis of simultaneity, the multi-layered reality of the synchronic, is lacking.

Here we might introduce music to further the argument. The metaphor of the two axes can be applied to musical structure. Rhythm and melody are of the language of succession while harmony is in the mode of the simultaneous, harmony being the effect of two or more tones sounded together. Rhythm and melody can be enjoyed on their own but at the higher levels of musical creativity they are co-ordinated with harmony.

When we look at the matter in this way we see that music is the result of a co-ordination of the successive and the simultaneous. So, also, is a poem. And so is self.

The rhythms of the body both manifest and create the feeling which is a basis of a particular state of self. The body is, as it were, the container of potential selfhood.

That the rhythm changes as the individual comes to life is illustrated by the biography of T.S. Eliot. During the period following World War I, Eliot was a dead man, listless, effete, artificial. His poetry had a dull, repetitive monotony. The opening lines of 'The Hollow Men' of 1925 are:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece stuffed with straw. . . .

Yet a few years later, he had come alive. In 'Marina', written in 1930, the rhythm is altogether different, a gathering exultant rush of returning life.

What seas what shores what grey rocks & what islands
What water lapping the bow
And scent of pine and the wood thrush singing through the fog
What images return
Oh my daughter. . . .

Markers of change

Although this passage is presented to show the rhythmic difference between Eliot's enervation of 1925 and his vitalization of 1930, it is evident that the two passages are significantly different in other ways. Language is made up of phonology, lexicon, and syntax. All three are markers of change. Phonology, i.e. the system of sounds which make up a language, is the earliest and most fundamental form of human communication since it is all that can be used for the first 18 months or so of life. The sound of the voice, its rhythms, intonations, its rising and falling, provides an index of the sense of aliveness. However, the words themselves, i.e. the lexicon, and the way they are used together, i.e. syntax, provide additional indices. The syntactical structures of the two pieces are contrasting. In 'The Hollow Men' the grammar is conventional while 'Marina' is relatively agrammatical, in the manner of Vygotsky's 'inner speech' (1962), which, as previously remarked, is an index of selfhood.

The developmental progression from phonology to lexicon to syntax exhibited in the first few years of the child's life suggests that with the emergence of self as an awareness of the stream of consciousness, comes an increasing complexity of human experience, manifest as language. Something of the potential for this complexity is apparent when we consider the features of the stream of consciousness. A non-exhaustive list of the more salient features includes (i) duality (i.e. reflective awareness); (ii) movement (i.e. sense of vitality); (iii) positive feeling ('warmth and intimacy', as James put it); (iv) non-linearity; (v) coherence; (vi) continuity; (vii) temporality; (viii) spatiality; (ix) ownership; (x) boundedness; (xi) agency; and (xii) content beyond the immediate present (i.e. of the possible, the imagined, the remembered).

These characteristics can be charted by linguistic means. For example, temporality and spatiality may be manifest in the conversation not only in terms of specific times and places, but also in syntax. Careful linguistic analysis can sometimes show in a single passage, a syntactical co-ordination of a number of different time-spaces. Complexity is compounded by the introduction of time-spaces which do not exist. This is exemplified, in large form, by the *Beowulf* poem. It tells of things which did not happen except in imagination. In micro-form, this kind of representation is manifest in the therapeutic conversation by such means as 'modal auxiliaries' (Quigley:2000 and 2001; Meares and Sullivan:2003). These are words such as 'could' and 'should'. A man might say: 'I suppose I could have just walked away'. He is imagining an action which did not take place.

The implication of these observations is that enhancement of the experience of 'going on being' will be manifest in forms of expression that show increasing complexity. This notion is consistent with the postulates of Hughlings Jackson (Taylor (ed.):1931-2; Meares:1999), the first, at least in the medical literature, to describe the duplex self, and an important intellectual ancestor not only of William James but also of Sigmund Freud.

Jackson's theory proposed that with the increasing complexity of mental life associated with the growth of reflective consciousness comes enhanced unification, or coherence, of the elements of mental life. This parameter can also be charted by linguistic means, several studies showing increased coherence of the language of borderline patients after a year's treatment (Henderson-Brooks:2000; Samir:2001). In an important initiative, Fonagy has been developing systems for identifying the emergence of reflective function by linguistic means (Fonagy et al.:1998).

Finally, however, the purpose of this article is not to detail technical aspects of linguistic analysis. Rather, the aim has been to present an idea, and to try to show that by conceiving the experience of 'going on being', or 'self', in a particular way, derived from experiential accounts and philosophic explanation, that it is possible, through skilled analyses of the 'minute particulars' (Hobson:1985) of the therapeutic conversation, to chart the processes of these encounters and to mark the movements of beneficial change. An emergent discipline in which such studies could be performed might be called a 'science of poetics'.

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